

## **Comment on “Present and Future of the British Schools, Institutes and Societies Abroad”**

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Bill Finlayson has set out the current position of the Academy-sponsored overseas Schools, Institutes and Societies very clearly and accurately. The fundamental issues are the need to maintain and develop the resource base – no organisation would claim that it does not need more, either for refurbishing and developing its physical infrastructure, or for developing its research activities. At the same time, the institutions must demonstrate to the funding bodies, the Council of the British Academy and its sponsor, the Office of Science and Technology (OST), that the research undertaken under their auspices is of the highest quality, equal to or better than that undertaken by comparable organisations in other countries.

From the Academy’s perspective, the amount spent on the Schools, Institutes and Societies is a significant proportion of its funds – about one third of grants distributed in 2005/2006. In this context and in an Academy whose discipline-base, particularly in the social sciences, has grown significantly – especially since public funding for the Schools was introduced in 1950 – the pressure to justify this level of expenditure has increased. Although traditionally associated with archaeology and classical antiquity, these are now only two out of a total of 18 ‘Subject Sections’ in the Academy. Neither Section may necessarily be represented on the Council at any one time, though the Chair of BASIS is a member *ex officio*. Against that background, it is easy to see why it is essential to diversify the subject base supported by the BASIS overseas organisations. In effect, each must be prepared to facilitate any kind of UK-sponsored research overseas in order to convince Council of its value. Such a diversification cannot, of course, happen overnight, but outside the world of archaeology, classical antiquity and history, how many disciplines in UK higher education (HE) are aware at all of the existence of the overseas Schools, Institutes and Societies? By the same token, are there other areas of the world where there are concentrations of research activity that would benefit from a dedicated organisation or a fixed base, not currently available, and that would give more value than one of the currently-funded organisations? The Academy’s International Policy Committee helps to facilitate research in all parts of the world not supported by BASIS institutions, and its budget is a mere £600 000.

Research quality is paramount. The recent reforms of the funding arrangements, distinguishing between establishment and outreach costs and those of research for the organisations with active premises overseas, and opening up the work of the Societies without overseas premises to competition, are helping to reassure the wider academic community that the same standards of peer review operate as for the rest of academe competing for research funding from the Academy, Leverhulme Trust and the Research Councils. With the Academy’s Research Committee supporting the strategic research

of the overseas Schools and Institutes, there is a real opportunity for innovative thinking and the development of multi-disciplinary research which has real impact. The total sum dedicated to strategic research among the BASIS institutions is some £690 000 in 2005/2006. Collaborations between organisations, such as those being developed among the institutions around the Mediterranean, are to be welcomed, and have the possibility of securing larger-scale funding than the traditional approach of individual organisations addressing only their own agendas. One of the negative aspects of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is that it has diminished the volume of longer-term research projects in favour of the short-term. Yet, for those engaged in any kind of field-based, multi-disciplinary research, a three- or five-year programme from fieldwork to final publication cannot necessarily have much impact. Working within a well-developed research strategy, underpinned by core funding, it should be possible to attract the additional resources, and partners for collaboration from outside the British Schools, Institutes and Societies, to undertake research which really does make a difference to knowledge and understanding.

Whether in terms of funding establishment costs or strategic research, the Academy's grants are surely to be regarded as providing the platform for winning additional resources to undertake world-class research, and not as the sole source of funding. Its grants will never be sufficient to maintain the standards of buildings and research infrastructure that modern organisations require to support their research, nor to undertake major programmes of research. While the longer-established institutions can look back to a time before 1950 when they were not dependent on public funds, this is not the case with the more recently-established organisations. Nevertheless, there have been very significant recent successes in attracting other funds, whether for major capital works, as at The British School at Rome, or for research, as with the million-pound Leverhulme-funded Water, Life, Civilisation research project focused in the Near East, based in Reading but working with the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL). As with the growth of development offices in UK Universities in the last few years, all organisations need to look to diversifying and expanding their resource base. Major research collaborations with a range of UK universities offer a real prospect of using the Academy's strategic research grants to gain access to Research Council grants. Full Economic Costing (FEC) is in its infancy, but through collaborations with UK HE, it offers a possible mechanism for channelling some resource back to host institutions overseas to reimburse research costs.

To conclude, the overseas Schools, Institutes and Societies (and the Council for British Archaeology (CBA), which is also supported by BASIS) are wonderful and precious resources for UK academe. From the Academy perspective, they need to continue to demonstrate that they are facilitating world-class research on a multi-disciplinary basis in the humanities and social sciences. To do this, it needs to be understood that whatever proportion of their funds derives from the Academy will never be enough, and that alternative sources need continuously to be sought. As an archaeologist and the newly appointed Chair of BASIS I will, of course, be delighted to see and help facilitate world-class archaeological research, but alongside a diversifying portfolio of research supported by the BASIS institutions.